

we are accustomed to death, we always suffer some anger and often deep pain at seeing friends vanish. You were an unknown, you would have been a name on a report and nothing more. That is what war is, and you must get used to it! However, you did pull off a very unusual feat, spending ten days in the Viet zone and returning. I am going to put you in for a citation for the Order of the Division; you deserve it. That's luck, too, to be cited less than a month after your arrival. So, Thebault, no hard feelings?" I shook his hand.

"No hard feelings," he said to me with total candidness.

"No hard feelings."

Assigned to the Regional Representation of Central Annam at Tourane, he was one of the best officers in the special missions.

Individual punches on the border of the Delta and over a very large area, like the commando operations on the coast, although sometimes spectacular, required exceptional qualities on the part of the staffs; actually they only caused the Viets some trivial annoyance.

If we wanted the GCMH to put something new into the conduct of the war, capable of creating serious problems for the Viets, something else had to be found.

The Hundreds of the Thai Country

The overwhelming majority of the Thai people were favorable to us, as were all the mountaineers as well. We knew that our Hundreds would have the best chances of moving and coming into contact with the people there. Their installation was as follows.

--Lai Chau, with Lieutenant Bole du Chaumont. Lai Chau was the capital of the Thai country, the fief of Deo van Long, the grandson of Deo van Tri, the head of the Black Pavilions who had killed Major Riviere at Pont-de-Papier near Hanoi in 1883;

--Than Uyen, with Lieutenant Castagnoli and two remarkable noncommissioned officers, Bourdon and Baudoin; and

--Nghia Lo, with Lieutenant Hans and a sound team of noncommissioned officers.

The Thai country was defended by small posts very far from one another like the prewar border posts, which could oppose the intrusion of some small armed bands, but could not resist an attack of powerfully equipped Viet divisions.

Since the people as a whole were favorable to us, it was possible in case of a general attack to leave in the rear of the Viet units large detachments of mountaineers able to live among the inhabitants and harass the means of transportation. This mission had been perfectly understood by the staffs of the Hundreds planted in the Thai country.

But in order to have reasonable chances of success, it was necessary to establish in depth a number of secretly installed food and munitions depots, and to have a perfect knowledge of the region and its inhabitants. To keep this secret, our Hundreds had to preserve a certain amount of independence with respect to the local command. This is what I wanted to explain to Colonel Coste, the commander of the ZANO (Autonomous Zone of the Northwest) at Lai Chau.

He was an excellent military man, a leader. His situation in the Thai country was certainly not one of complete leisure. But after an hour of discussion I had not succeeded in having him accept my point of view.

"I am," he said to me, "the leader responsible for security in the Thai country. I want to be aware of everything which transpires in my zone and I want all the troops stationed there, for no matter what reason, to be under my orders."

I called his attention to the weakness of their means of defense and explained to him that they could not resist a regular attack mounted by enemy divisions equipped with modern armament. In case of attack perhaps he would continue to command the troops which could have withdrawn, but the zone for which he was responsible would pass over to the control of the Viets if we did not leave behind them some light detachments able to harass them.

This was a situation which he refused to envisage. Then he showed me a map delineating a very precise zone controlled by the Viets along the China frontier, where we were forbidden any activity. This decision had been taken at his request by General de Lattre. Actually he was afraid that any action in this region would bring about a reaction from the Chinese, which he wanted to avoid at any cost. Actually the few elements which we had left in the Pha Long region when we had abandoned Lao Kay in October 1951 had been annihilated by a Chinese battalion. But he was going to leave, replaced by Colonel L..., who had the reputation of being a very understanding man. I went to Lai Chau to try to convince him of my viewpoint.

He received me and immediately said, "You thought you would have me with the departure of Colonel Coste. Well, you will not get me. I shall pursue the same policy."

Colonel Coste had the well-deserved reputation of being a first-class military man who, in Indochina or elsewhere, had shown indisputable properties. Being his successor, he wanted to prove himself the equal of General Coste by his stubbornness.

In spite of this handicap, the Hundreds of the Thai country began to work. Those with Than Uyen went with small teams to mine the highway from Lao Kay to Chapa. Nghia Lo's group infiltrated teams right to the border of the Red River. They detected the Viet Minh offensive against the Thai country as early as July, and regularly noted its progress. We shall speak in more detail of these two Hundreds.

The Hundred of Lai Chau, with Lieutenant Bole du Chaumont, although hampered by the restricted zone along the Chinese border, multiplied reconnaissance with light elements over an immense territory. It was permanently able to detect a large scale attack on the capital of the Thai country.

It also had the mission of exploring to the west of the restricted zone the region between the Chinese border and the Laos, which the French administration and the Army had abandoned.

For this purpose Bole du Chaumont formed small teams composed of a noncommissioned officer--a corporal, a senior corporal or even a soldier--accompanied by two or three native Thais originating in the region to be covered. Each team carried a radio set to maintain contact with the Lai Chau base. A mule was put at their disposal to transport their materiel.

These teams covered the regions assigned to them without encountering any difficulty or any Viet elements. Everywhere they were well-received by the inhabitants who gave them lodging. The people did not understand why the French had abandoned them. This is how one team discovered, at the edge of the border, Colonel Chinois, who had been installed in the Muong Nhie region in 1950 with his entire regiment, in order to escape the communists. Neither the Chinese, nor the Viets, nor the French, had disturbed him. He asked only to be put at the disposition of the French Army.

Only one team disappeared. Two months after its departure we learned, by means of a rapid inquiry, that the senior corporal of the team had settled down in a village. He had married a girl from the region and was not pressed to rejoin the Lai Chau base.

The Underground of Cho Quang Lo

It soon became quite obvious that, no matter what their value, the Hundreds based in occupied territory, would never be able to go very deep. Their activities would always be limited.

Therefore we envisioned making direct contact far in the interior with the mountain peoples of a zone from which we had been practically excluded since the abandonment of Lao Kay and of Cao Bang in October 1951, and about which we had no intelligence.

Hautier first made a census of all the peoples of these regions who had withdrawn from Hanoi, in particular the prominent people, maintaining a small troop around them as well as they could.

The one who looked most useful to us was Lo Wen Teu, a former eminent person in the region of Pa Kha and of Phalong. Hautier convinced him to work with us and to put his team of loyal men at our disposal.

But the GCMA lacked means of aerial reconnaissance. To derive the benefits of an airplane, we obtained from the Command the authority to participate ourselves in dropping materiel over the posts in the High Region. Once the drop was finished, we kept the airplane for an hour to fly over the region involved.

We knew in particular that at the time of the evacuation of Lao Kay, one of our partisan leaders, Cho Quang Lo, had not wanted to retreat. He had remained in the Phalong region with a radio, Zim, and a 694 set. But contact could only be maintained for a month. A Chinese battalion had crossed the frontier and dispersed the few partisans whom Cho Quang Lo had been able to regroup around him. But Lo Wen Teu informed us that Cho Quang Lo had taken refuge in the caves and that he was still alive.

For several months we flew over the region with pilots who took a great interest in our mission. As we passed the people left the villages and made signs

of friendship to us; some waved hastily fabricated French flags. Therefore we decided, in agreement with Lo Wan Teu, who always accompanied us, to parachute two of Cho Quang Lo's loyal followers near a village which seemed the most sympathetic to us.

That day we had first parachuted some materiel to the Than Yen post. Rarely in this region had we encountered so many air pockets. In the airplane we were tossed about like dead leaves and everyone of us without exception, from the two droppers to Hautier, Ly Teu and me, suffered frightfully from air sickness. The two volunteers to be parachuted were in a lamentable state.

However, once the materiel had been dropped, we went toward the zone chosen by Lo Wan Teu south of Phalong, near a small village. This village was located on the edge of a forest in a small clearing. We decided to drop our two volunteers who, I must admit, had never before jumped with a parachute, onto this clearing. We had only taught them how to get out of the harness when they reached the ground.

Flying over the village in a hedge-hopping way, we saw many Chinese soldiers, recognizable by their uniform, who were going about their business and observing our airplance.

We hesitated to parachute our two representatives. When consulted, Lo Wan Teu told us that it had to be done. We put the parachutes onto their backs, and they took their position near the door. On the signal they jumped without hesitation. The younger one was about 20 years old, and the older had already passed 50. The younger one dropped into the middle of the clearing; he rapidly removed his parachute, but the Chinese rushed in pursuit of him. However, we saw him reach the forest without being apprehended. The older one fell into the forest, and we could clearly see the cloth of his parachute in the trees.

During a second pass we were supposed to drop their small amount of personal equipment. But, since there were a great many Chinese on the ground, we thought

it more prudent not to do so, particularly since it would not have been possible for our two agents to recover it.

We returned, uncertain of the success of this first mission.

However, several days later the SDECE listening posts communicated the following telegram to us: "The French have parachuted two pirates¹ in the region of Phalong...one was arrested...the other..." After the word "other", the telegram had not been able to be deciphered.

This information was enough for us to know that at least one of the two agents had been able to fulfill his contact mission and put Zim back on the radio, and to get to Cho Quang Lo or one of his friends the message intended for them.²

By means of this message we asked whoever received it to lay out on the ground the initials of a son of Cho Quang Lo who had been dead for several years, and which only the people of his immediate circle could know. On the appointed day, i.e., 1 May 1952, we had an airplane available and again went to fly over the region. Enormous letters, the initials awaited, were drawn on a large green slope, CQT, visible for 50 kilometers. Around them many inhabitants waved and made gestures of friendship to us.

¹ Our underground fighters were called "pirates" by the Viets.

² At first we thought that it was the young man who had escaped the Chinese. Unfortunately he had been caught and arrested. On the other hand, although we could easily see the cloth of the parachute of the older man, he had been invisible from the ground. He waited for nightfall to leave the forest, and carried out the mission assigned to him.

We decided to immediately drop a small 536 set to make contact with them. Zim was among the inhabitants. We saw him pick up the small parachute and take the 536. He immediately made contact with Lo Wan Teu. He told us that the 695 which had been left for him several months before was broken down. He asked for another one to establish secure contact with us.. The next day we parachuted the requested set to him. Contact was made immediately.

Zim told us that he was close to a very important leader of the region: Hoang Tseo Lung.³ He asked that a hundred rifles be parachuted to him as rapidly as possible so he could get rid of the few Viet Minh elements which were occupying the region. He added that Cho Quang Lo had taken refuge with several loyal followers in the limestone rocks east of Phalong.

The next day the 100 weapons requested were parachuted to Hoang Tseo Lung. In the following days he rapidly got rid of all of the troops and some Viet elements which held the country. He asked for new weapons for the partisans who were regrouping around him. In one week 400 weapons and munition were parachuted to Hoang Tseo Lung and to Zim.

It took a long time to establish contact with Cho Quang Lo. It was really difficult to discover him in the inextricable system of caves and cliffs which served him as a refuge.

However, one afternoon I went to the FTMN (Ground Forces in North Vietnam) General Staff looking for an airplane able to fly over the High Region. General Pelissier, the commander of the Tonkin Air Force, was very interested in the growing underground.

³ Well-known by Lo Wan Teu, a grand lord.

"I will take you," he said to me simply.

With Bantier and Lo Wan Teu we took off, carrying munitions and rice for Hoang Tseo Lung. Once the drop had been made, we again flew north to look for Cho Quang Lo. I had taken a seat in the pilot's position, next to General Pelissier.

"What you are doing is exciting," he said to me! "We are going to make several hedge-hopping runs, and we will end up by discovering your man."

Actually, flying very low we perceived a Neo waving a small tricolored flag at the foot of a cliff on a small platform.

"That's Cho Quang Lo," Lo Wan Teu told us. "I recognized him."

On the second pass we parachuted to him a 536 set which, with unprecedented luck in this broken countryside, fell right at his feet. He picked up the set and immediately established communication with Lo Wan Teu.

He asked him to parachute 50 guns to him as soon as possible in a clearing near him, so that he could leave the caves where he had taken refuge with his loyal followers.

The next day we parachuted the 50 guns requested with the necessary ammunition.

Radio contact was established immediately. All of the partisans were alerted. Cho Quang Lo asked for 200 weapons so that they could retake the old French post of Phalong occupied by the Viets.

The next day, in the same clearing, 200 weapons were parachuted and we saw Cho Quang Lo's men leave the forest and run to collect them.

Hoang Tseo Lung, further to the south, was now continuously harassed by the local Viet troops. Every day we punctually parachuted the armament, munitions and food which they asked of us.

For about a month Colonel de Bollardiere had assigned Junior Lieutenant Courrousse, about 30 years old, to me.

"Don't expose him too much," Colonel de Bollardiere had said to me. "He is married and the father of three children; his wife, who is a nurse, is supposed to meet him at Hanoi any day now."

Actually, except for his profession of General Staff photographer, I never took him on the operations. However, the parachute drops to Hoang Tseo Lung, now daily, excited us all. One afternoon, as we were about to leave for the airfield, I said to Courrousse, "Come along with us. We are going to fly over a magnificent region where there are beautiful photographs to be taken. Bring your camera."

We took off with the ammunition and food intended for Hoang Tseo Lung, with Lieutenant Vincendon as the dropper.

When contacted, Hoang Tseo Lung asked us not to make the parachute drop. He was seriously engaged with a regional Viet unit. There would be difficulties in collecting the material which was intended for him. He asked me to return the next day and did not display any concern about the combat joined on the ground. "Tomorrow," he said to us. "I shall have crushed this company which has ventured into my territory."

Instead of turning around, we went toward Cho Quang Lo. Then about one kilometer from the Phalong post we saw the large white T which we had asked be displayed to mark the DZ (dropping zone), where he wanted to collect the parachutes. Without waiting for radio contact to be made with Cho Quang Lo, the Dakota pilot confidently set off in the direction of the T.

Vincendon, Courrousse and I were stretched out with our heads close to the open door of the aircraft, a splendid observatory to watch the countryside from.

This white T which we could distinguish very well did not give me confidence, since radio contact had not yet been made. Therefore I rushed to the pilot to ask him to climb higher, but we were already quite close to the ground, about 200 meters, parachute altitude.

The airplane slowly began to rise when Lt. Vincendon rushed toward me with his arm bleeding, saying that someone was firing at us.

We rapidly left the range of the weapon aimed at us, but Lt. Courousse had taken a bullet in the neck, and it had cut his carotid artery. We headed for Hanoi, hoping to save him, but a few moments afterward Courousse was dead, having bled to death.

His wife arrived the next day. Therefore I had to give her this sad news. I was sorry we had taken him with us for a mission which seemed routine and not really dangerous to me, but where his presence was not required. Indeed, I have often found that luck favors and seems to protect those who are often exposed to danger, while it is often pitiless toward those who are exposed by chance without absolute necessity.

The next day we returned to the Cho Quang Lo zone. The same T was still in the same place and, like the day before, did not produce more than a shaky confidence in me. However, radio contact was quickly made with Cho Quang Lo.

He told us that a FM (expansion unknown) installed in a pillbox of the former Phalong post had used us as a target. But that very night Cho Quang Lo had taken over the post and occupied it. Therefore we could descend to the dropping altitude without being worried and perform the anticipated parachute drop.

Then we flew over the dropping zone several times at hedge-hopping altitude, with all of the people gathered to celebrate the fall of the Phalong post.

Cho Quang Lo and Hoang Tseo Lung were able to meet very soon.

At the end of February, 2,500 weapons had been parachuted to our first underground organization, which we were going to name Chocolat. The old nearby posts of Sin Ma Kay and Xi Man surrendered without giving us any trouble.

During the first week of June the Viet 148th Regiment, based at Lao Kay, tried to annihilate the Chocolat underground. It was rapidly crushed and had to return to its base at Lao Kay in panic. From then on Cho Quang Lo, proud of his success and master of his region, planned to march on Lao Kay and take over the town. For this he requested heavy armament (mortars), ammunition and rations from us, which were regularly parachuted to him.

At my request Cho Quang Lo was made a Knight of the Legion of Honor, and was integrated into the French Army with the rank of Lieutenant. I wanted to put the Cross on him myself, but in this very rough terrain it was impossible to even make a path to Morane and, at this time, we did not yet have a helicopter.

Therefore I parachuted his Knight's Cross to him and, up on a Dakota with comrades who had taken a large part in the creation of this underground, we attended the ceremonial parade organized by Cho Quang Lo in front of our old Phalaeng post where the French flag waved again. Some 500 men with weapons participated in this celebration, as well as the entire populace.

This success exceeded all of the aspirations of the GCMA team.

When the Chinese communists had arrived at the Tonkin border in 1951, we had collected in an old frontier post the remains of Chiang Kai Shek's army, whom we had then repatriated to Formosa (Taiwan).

Some officers had requested to remain with us. There were about 20 of them, of the rank of major and captain, whom we had collected at Dien Bien Phu to avoid the curiosity of the American Special Services. But, while the Command had a poor idea of their usefulness, the Americans began to become interested in them. In one

way or another they had to be moved. At Dien Bien Phu they were under the direction of a very valuable noncommissioned officer who initiated them into the handling of French weapons and the work of destruction. I proposed to the Command that they be parachuted to Cho Quang Lo. They were all frontier people who knew Cho Quang Lo, who was delighted to get them.

They accepted on one condition: that the noncommissioned officer who had trained them jump with them among the underground fighters. The officer was willing to, and everyone prepared actively for the mission.

The parachuting took place. I had asked the noncommissioned officer to jump last, so that he himself could check everyone's equipment before they jumped. When his turn came, I had the door closed; I took him back to Hanoi with me.

He was unpleasantly surprised, but I told him that since there was no chance of recovering him, I had not wanted to lose a noncommissioned officer of his quality.

"You are not a movie star," I emphasized, "to be able to play a role so perfectly. You would not have put so much heart into preparing this mission, if you had not really intended to accompany the Chinese to the ground, and they themselves would have been able to notice it."

He finally accepted my reasons. As for Cho Quang Lo, he was happy for the reinforcements of valuable staff, a reinforcement which was to be very useful to him.

The fighters of Cho Quang Lo and of Hoang Tseo Lung developed in the High Region like a brush fire. Beaten, the 148th Regiment had been forced to take refuge in Lao Kay. The Viets, who were preparing their autumn offensive, had no possibility of correcting the situation. They appealed to the Chinese, who were already massed along the border anyway.

Cho Quang Lo was aware of the Chinese preparations. He asked us to parachute him 1,000 antipersonnel mines. The Chinese, whom we had sent him, were perfectly able to use them.

When the Chinese 302nd Infantry Division, four regiments strong (the 9th, 111th, 112th and 113th), crossed the frontier on 18 June, the mines were in place. The 9th Regiment was completely annihilated, and its colonel and general staff were taken prisoner by Cho Quang Lo. Unfortunately we did not have a helicopter to recover them with at this time.

Every day we parachuted to Cho Quang Lo or to Hoang Tsee Lung the rations and ammunition which they ordered from us. And whenever it was possible, the support of the F-26's was given to them. Since parachuting was becoming more and more dangerous, they were protected by a Privater of the National Navy. At first it dropped its load of bombs (five tons) on the objectives indicated by Cho Quang Lo, then it flew over the region. It was an excellent observation post. I often occupied a place in this bomber with Lt. Lautier. One day we discovered a Chinese battalion stationed in a village. We made a low pass with the Privater first firing its front machine guns and then its rear machineguns. The aim was excellent. The Chinese, surprised, suffered very heavy losses. But in the second pass fire from automatic weapons was waiting for us. The aircraft was hit a dozen times. I shared a bullet with my neighbor, a noncommissioned officer from the Navy. Half of it lodged in my thigh and the other half in his calf, without any grave damage. We thought it more prudent to regain altitude.

Unfortunately we were unable to communicate with Cho Quang Lo except with a single radio set, Zim's 694.

The Chinese replaced their lost regiment by the 114th, and the battle continued bitterly. Unfortunately on 15 August, for unknown reasons, radio communication with him was interrupted. From then on it was impossible for us to provide him with anything to Cho Quang Lo.

Several months later Zim succeeded in reaching Hanoi. Cho Quang Lo continued to fight desperately for several months, as did Hoang Tseo Lung. With some loyal followers, they took refuge in the caves. But the Chinese succeeded in having them assassinated.

These underground fighters, who had begun so well and in whom we had so much hope, temporarily became dormant.

The Command was aware of the combat which we were joining against the 302nd Division. A number of times I asked for official notice to be taken of this Chinese intervention. But I received a formal rejection. If the people in Paris learned that a regular Chinese division had come back to Tonkin, they told me, they would go crazy. It was better for France not to know. And, indeed, it still does not know it.

however, it was very serious. In 1951 a Chinese battalion had liquidated the embryo of underground fighters which we had tried to install in this region. In 1952 a complete division intervened.

This showed without any shadow of a doubt the constant support which China supplied to the Viets in all areas. In principle it did not intervene directly in the field, sending only weapons, munitions, materiel, rations, advisors.... But it followed the situation very closely, ready to do more if it were necessary and even to intervene directly in battle with regular troops. As a matter of fact in Indochina our real enemy is China.

The Odyssey of Sergeant Schoepf

Before the Viet attack our Hundreds of Lai Chau, Than Uyen and Nghia Lo displayed intense activity. Beginning in September the Hundred of Nghia Lo, with Lt. Hans, sergeants Schoepf, Muat, Jacques and Janik, and corporals Chaignon and Blaizon, revealed the crossing of the first elements of the Viet Minh divisions at Yen Bay. Then they kept track of the progress of the advanced elements.

The Hundred of Than Uyen placed mines on all of the routes leading to the Red River. A number of times the underground fighters mined the highway from Lao Kay to Chapa and blew up many bridges.

The Lai Chau Hundred, annoyed by the restricted zone at the China border by the ZANO (Northwest Autonomous Zone) Command, multiplied reconnaissance by very light elements over an immense territory.

Beginning on 15 September it became evident that the Viets were going to launch their autumn offensive in the direction of Nghia Lo, which they had not been able to conquer the previous year. But this year they were advancing with their entire battle corps.

On 7 October I had gone to Nghia Lo with some of the General Staff officers of the FTVN (North Vietnam Ground Forces). Lt. Hans, who had perfectly followed the progress of the Viet divisions by means of his advanced elements, which were always in contact, asked for authorization to take to the field with all of his partisans. He wanted to be in a good position at the rear or on the flanks of the Viet divisions when they took the offensive.

Despite my insistence, this authorization was refused him. On the contrary the Colonel commanding ZANO had Hans put completely at his disposal.

Thus on 16 October, the day before the Nghia Lo attack and the day when Bigeard parachuted to Tu Le, Hans and his men spent the day setting mines among the barbed wire entanglements surrounding the path. But, anticipating the imminent

attack, Hans refused to be shut up in the post. When night had fallen he tried to rejoin his advanced elements who, on orders from Sergeant-Major Schoepf, had remained in the field. He was never able to rejoin them. During the same night Nghia Lo was besieged. Crushed by a severe heavy mortar attack, the post surrendered under the force of numbers at daybreak.

For more than a month Hans, and especially Schoepf's Hundred, were the only source of intelligence, thanks to their daily messages, which allowed the Command to mark the Viet advance and to recognize the enemy's intentions. Unfortunately these means rapidly proved to be insufficient.

We were not able to make the first drops of rations to Hans until two weeks after the fall of Nghia Lo. But the drops could not be clandestine. It was impossible to conduct them at night because we had to fly very low in this mountainous region. The first parachute drop allowed them to last another two weeks. Nevertheless it was impossible to make a second drop. The weather, as often happens in November, was overcast. Every afternoon we took off with the Dakota loaded with rations and ammunition. We flew over the region in which Hans had stayed. We made radio contact, but could not find holes in the clouds which would have permitted us to make the emergency drop. One of the native noncommissioned officers had betrayed Hans. Since the Viets knew his value and the danger which he constituted against them, they had succeeded in introducing a traitor into his team. Taken prisoner, he was killed after having been frightfully tortured.

But Hans had not regrouped all of his elements around Nghia Lo. For six months Sergeant Schoepf had been recruiting a commando of natives around the Bai Nong post in the Meo zone. In the mountains he had installed a small base. He had also recruited a commando in the Tsien Tang region, while his comrade Janik was recruiting a Thai commando in the neighboring region. Each commando had about 30 men commanded by local leaders.

Schoepf had organized these groups perfectly, with Sergeant Guignard, Corporal Blaison and an excellent radio operator, Sergeant Muet, as aides. They had performed good preliminary work in the region between Nghia Lo and the Red River. The controlled about a thousand inhabitants.

In each village which they went through, after having suppressed the local Viet leaders, they had established Committees of Liberations with a chairman, a vice-chairman, a secretary, intelligence agents and a small protection group composed in general of three or four young peasants.

Lt. Hons had monitored this experiment closely. Having such a team of remarkably gifted noncommissioned officers under him, he had given them maximum initiative and provided them with the means they requested as far as he could. They had rapidly learned how to gain a great deal of influence over the people and over the men in their commandos, rough and simple men, who had great admiration for these young French noncommissioned officers who had accepted to live their life, and to adopt their clothing and their hair style. Those who served with the Meos, for example, had their skull completely shaved, leaving only a tuft of hair hanging between their shoulders. They were particularly impressive in their physical strength, their perfect knowledge of their profession and their courage under all kinds of conditions.

In a word they were leaders in the sense that this should be taken in the Army, giving example to their men by their moral and intellectual values, and by their physical qualities. By force of circumstances they had become real leaders of bands. Even if circumstances sometimes forced their men to abandon them, they were never betrayed.

The Meo commandos, who were unquestionably the best warriors, had undergone a short period of paratrooper training in Hanoi with Schoepf. Nothing had surprised them. They quickly established their excellence and had jumped barefooted without any accidents to rejoin their base.

Throughout this period their best means of propaganda was the support which they regularly received from the Air Force. When an objective appeared to justify a Chasse or B-26's, it was enough for them to notify the Hanoi Central Office for the Chasse or the B-26's to intervene a few hours later, guided to the designated objective by the noncommissioned officers on the ground.

Some advanced Mao elements had crossed the Red River in May, after having made contact with the Meos of Cho Quang Lo who were installed in the region north of Yen Bay. Beginning on 15 September these same elements gave notice that the Viets were crossing the Red River at Yen Bay and taking positions on the right bank. They were thought to be elements of the 308th, the best and the most famous of the Viet divisions, and of the 312th.

It must be said that our best source of intelligence in Indochina was the listening posts. In this area it can be said that the SDECE deciphering teams had attained perfection. These Viet messages were a precise source of intelligence and were by far the best that the French Command had with respect to the Viet Minh battle corps, its movements and its supply system. In addition the enemy's intentions were very often revealed to us in this way.

However, at the beginning of each autumn campaign the Viets changed all of their codes. It took about a month for our decoders to reconstitute them. For our 2nd Bureau this was a difficult gap to fill.

Schoepf and his loyal radioman, Muet, contributed a great deal to filling it by the intelligence they regularly succeeded in sending us. For example, they successively detected the passage of elements of the 308th, the 312th and the 316th into the zone where they were operating. Schoepf was practically navigating with his three commandos in the middle of the stream of Viet divisions heading westward. On 16 October he helped, from a remote position, in the parachute drop of the Bigeard battalion into the Tu Le region, 30 kilometers north of Nghia Lo.

For him this was the signal that heavy combat was going to begin. On the evening of the 17th, he learned that the Nghia Lo post had fallen. In view of the enormous number of men whom he had seen march past, and the extent of the materiel which they were transporting, this was in no wise a surprise to him.

But from this day on he was cut off from his leader, Lt. Mans, who had refused to be shut up in the post despite the threat of the Viet attack and who had not been able to reach him because he had left too late. Thus, Schoepf's team was definitively cut off from Nghia Lo. It had contact only by radio with the GCMA Central Office in Hanoi which, alas, was unable to give him any information. On the contrary, the Central Office was waiting with the greatest interest for the intelligence which Schoepf's team could communicate to it.

Relatively well organized, Schoepf lived with his men on their hidden stores and with the help given to them by the villagers who, despite the Viet troops circulating in the area, continued to welcome and inform them.

Schoepf asked us only to drop two crystals for two radio sets which were out of order. The drop took place with a Beaver which used a small parachute to avoid it being spotted. But the density of Viet occupation was such that the parachute was seen, and that recovery of the crystals had to be made under a hail of bullets fired by a rapidly alerted Viet company. From then on any parachute drops were impossible.

However, Schoepf's team was able to survive under extraordinarily difficult conditions until the end of November. But his partisans were alarmed by this unprecedented Viet outpouring. The leaders of the village of Mans sent him a delegation asking him to scatter into the villages with his men, to bury their weapons and to wait until the storm had passed.

For the Mans, such dissimulation could be easy. But for the Europeans and their Thai commando it was impossible. Therefore Schoepf asked for time to think.

During the next night the Man commando left, leaving its weapons behind. Schoepf and Guignard buried them and booby-trapped them and all their caches. The latter blew up when informers led the Viets to them.

Schoepf still had his Thai commando and his Meo commando, two Europeans, Guignard and Blaizon, and his Thai radio operator; Muet had been severely wounded during an engagement.

Powerlessly the underground fighters watched the heavy incursion of Viet units, the systematic occupation of villages by the Viet Minh, and the destruction of the work which they had accomplished several months earlier. In particular they watched the first gangs of prisoners pass without any possibility of rescuing them. One day Schoepf learned that an armed group was camping in a village; this was Lt. Nung's group. He had parachuted into the region with his commando at the beginning of September to finish training before joining the Chocolat underground, which had never ceased its resistance.

They made contact, and spent the night pleasantly in the village with its inhabitants. Nung was very well known but, as a security measure, they had to separate the next day. Nung, who perfectly knew the region and its inhabitants, men of his race, succeeded after a number of maneuvers in rejoining the entrenched camp at Na San at the end of November.

It became impossible to remain in the Man zone which was completely occupied by the Viets. From now on Schoepf and his fighters had to live in strictest hiding, avoiding villages even recently friendly.

First they went toward the Red River with their two commandos. But the Red River was heavily monitored with a post established at about every kilometer. It was impossible to reach it and float down it on a raft with all the men, as they had planned. If pushed the three Europeans could have tried it, but there was no question of them abandoning their comrades, especially the Thais, on the bank.

They decided to abandon the banks, to climb back to the peaks and to regain the Meo zone which had always been loyal to them.

Pursued without respite by the Viets, they took off their shoes to avoid leaving tracks. The communists elements followed them by one day's march, persuaded that this involved large forces since they were in radio contact with Hanoi every day, and delivered a message every evening, a message which the Central Office was always impatiently awaiting.

During the first two weeks of November, when Schoepf was beginning his daily broadcasts, Viet regulars equipped with camouflage clothing and covered with foliage, emerged from the surrounding cover and requested them to surrender.

Schoepf emptied his clip into his radio set and fled into the brush with Sergeant Guignard. Powerlessly they watched the massacre of the men of the Thai commando, while their own interpreter, taken prisoner, asked for their surrender on order of the Viets, assuring them that no harm would come to them. They remained camouflaged throughout the day while the Viets systematically searched all of the thickets without discovering them. At night, along the crest which was their habitual retreat line pointed out by the Meos, they met Blaizon. He had also succeeded in escaping.

Without a radio set, with only their personal weapons and with a few grams of instant coffee, a bowl of rice, the code, a compass and a rap which unfortunately stopped 50 kilometers from the axis which they had finally chosen in the direction of Hanoi, the three of them continued to try to reach our lines for 25 more days. On the peaks the Meos welcomed them and gave them some food. Despite the great reward offered to them, the Meos never betrayed them.

But the Meos only occupied the peaks. To reach a new habitat it was necessary to cross a valley where their guides stopped. They penetrated deeper and deeper into a zone which was unknown to them.

In a valley, after they had been sheltered by a Black Thai family, the Viets surprised them while they were eating the rice provided by the people. They had only time enough to jump to their weapons; they fought in close combat and again succeeded in taking flight. From now on they were no more than luckless game pursued without interruption.

For several more days they miraculously escaped all traps and all ambushes. Reduced to eating roots, lizards and snakes, they realized that their strength was declining rapidly. Barefooted and in rags, at the end of their strength, they could barely make four kilometers per day. In the second week of November they had left only some carbine ammunition and two phosphorus grenades. They had reached the DZ (dropping zone) where Bigeard's battalion had jumped on 16 October. They found the parachute harnesses. From the top of a cliff they threw their two incendiary grenades onto a rice silo around which 200 to 300 Viet soldiers had just eaten. In the following moment the Viet Minh rushed to their bags.

Having once again miraculously escaped the pursuit which began immediately, and knowing that this miracle could not be repeated indefinitely, Schoepf began to think about surrendering. He spoke of this to his two companions. Despite the advice of Blaizon, who was opposed to it, they destroyed their weapons, came out of their hiding places and, with their arms clearly raised, walked in the direction of the closest village. A Viet combat group, perfectly equipped, encircled them immediately.

After having had them tied up, the Viet noncommissioned officer gave them each a cigarette and took them to the regimental command post for their first interrogation. They had agreed among themselves to say that they belonged to the paratroop battalion which had jumped into the region on 16 October, that they had gotten lost, and that they had never been able to rejoin the battalion. Thus they were able to hide the fact that they belonged to the GCMIA, which would have gotten them the most